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ABSTRACT

Neurotic fear of success is conceptually connected to achievement motivation and achievement related conflicts. To investigate the relationship between individuals identified as success-fearers, or failure-fearers, and those high in achievement motivation, 426 college students completed Cohen's Fear of Success Scale, Mandler-Sarason's Test Anxiety Questionnaire, and the Thematic Apperception Test scored for achievement motivation. Preliminary work with the measures showed variable correlations among the scales, with success-fearers falling predominantly in the fear of failure category and non-success-fearers falling predominantly in the resultant high achievement motivation category. Investigations of the behavioral differences between fear of success and fear of failure subjects using reading tasks, false success feedback, and a puzzle risk-taking task showed that high success fearers had a significant decrement in mean performance scores compared with the other neurotic fear of success classifications. Those high in resultant achievement motivation and failure-fearers showed no tendancy to engage in self-sabotage following success feedback. (Author/JAC)

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Neurotic Fear of Success, Fear of Failure and Need-Achievement

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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the relationship between individuals identified as success-fearers, failure-fearers, and those high in resultant achievement motivation, a total of 426 subjects were administered Cohen's Fear of Success Scale, Mandler-Sarason's Test Anxiety Questionnaire, and the Thematic Apperception Test scored for achievement motivation. Preliminary work with the measures showed variable correlations among the scales, with success-fearers falling predominantly in the fear of failure category and non-success-fearers falling predominantly in the high resultant achievement motivation category. In investigating behavioral differences, subjects in Study 1 were administered a Time 1-Time 2 reading task involving false success feedback. Following feedback, high success-fearers showed a significant decrement in mean performance as compared with the other neurotic fear of success classifications. In contrast to success-fearers, those high in resultant achievement motivation and failure-fearers showed no tendency to engage in self-sabotage following success feedback. A puzzle risk-taking task was also administered. Contrary to prediction, the high resultant achievement motivation group and failure-fearers did not significantly differ in preference for moderate risk. Study 2, which repeated the risk-taking measure without the reading task, provided no additional evidence, beyond that provided by Study 1, for the difference between measures of resultant achievement motivation and neurotic fear of success.

Neurotic Fear of Success, Fear of Failure and Need-Achievement

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The work reported here deals with two separate lines of research--"neurotic" fear of success (NFOS), and achievement motivation. Since NFOS is conceptually connected to the realm of achievement motivation and achievement-related conflicts, these lines of work have been brought under scrutiny in an attempt to specify their relationship to each other. Researchers of NFOS (Canavan-Gumpert, Garner, & Gumpert, 1978), building on the theoretical work of Freud and Horney, and upon the experimental work of Pappo and Cohen, have taken a socio-psychological perspective in conceptualizing the success-fearer as one who has three achievement-related motives: a desire to succeed, a desire to avoid failure, and a desire to avoid success. While the desire to succeed and to avoid failure are in the success-fearer's conscious awareness, the desire to avoid success is not. People who fear success, then, also fear failure; however, their responses to the two conditions are opposite. Confronted with success, success-fearers engage in self-sabotage;

confronted with failure, they (despite felt anxiety) show a dramatic improvement in performance. These responses of success-fearers are in contrast to those of non-success-fearers, who show improvement when confronted with success, and who respond to failure with a lessened performance presumably out of depression or task withdrawal. Success-fearers, then, do fear failure--but they are apparently energized by it, and whether they realize it or not, turn in quite good performances when failure threatens. Since they also want to succeed, but have difficulty doing so straightforwardly, success-fearers appear frequently to fear that they are doing badly or that they are going to fail, perhaps as a strategy to allow them to work well with less of the anxiety that being in the success region engenders. Success-fearers have been described as people whose self-esteem is low and as having a tendency to repudiate their competence--that is, essentially to deny that any success they have is a reproducible product of their own agency (and ability). NFOS is usually measured through a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that is based on the defenses the success-fearer is believed to use (Cohen, 1974; Pappo, 1972).

Researchers of achievement motivation utilize a model (Atkinson, 1958) that centers on the assumption that, given a risk alternative with a probability of success equal to .50, resultant achievement motivation is maximally positive for persons in whom the motive for success is stronger than the motive to avoid failure, that is, those high in need for

achievement (nAch), and maximally negative for failure-fearers (FOF), in whom the motive to avoid failure is stronger than the motive to achieve success. From this model, specific predictions are made regarding the risk-taking behavior of these groups. Presumably, those high in need for achievement prefer intermediate risks, while failure-fearers are expected to take either very low or very high risks (theoretically preferring to avoid the intermediate risk). In achievement motivation research, Atkinson and his colleagues have utilized a combination of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), scored for achievement motivation, and the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ), measuring test anxiety, to classify those high in achievement motivation (high TAT, low TAQ scores) and those who fear failure (low TAT, high TAQ scores).

Reported in this paper is a summary of some preliminary work (n=308) we have conducted comparing measures from research on fear of success and achievement motivation. While not expecting a complete overlap in the measures used to classify failure-fearers, those with high nAch, and success-fearers, some overlap is expected due to the common thread of fear of failure (as well as an interest in achievement). An empirical investigation (n=72) is also reported in which the behavioral indications of NFOS, FOF, and nAch were examined in conjunction with the personality measures typically used in both lines of research. In other words, the empirical study was designed to answer the following questions: Do people low in resultant

achievement motivation who are presumed to be failure-fearers and not motivated to achieve success sabotage their performance in the face of success? Do people who score high on the NFOS scale avoid moderate risks and prefer the extremes? In addition, several hypotheses were tested. It was predicted that success-fearers are more likely to show a decrement in performance after success feedback than non-success-fearers, and that this difference does not emerge between people low in resultant achievement motivation and those who are high in resultant achievement motivation. In addition, failure-fearers would display either very low or very high risk-taking behavior, while high nAch people would prefer intermediate risks. No prediction was made as to the risk-taking behavior of success-fearers. Some additional research was conducted in response to some surprising results that were obtained (n=46).

Preliminary Testing

Subjects

The three measures under consideration were administered to 102 male and 206 female undergraduates at Boston College in groups of approximately 30 students during regular class times.

Measures

The tests consisted of a series of paper-and-pencil measures stapled together and presented to the subject as a single packet. The following measures appeared in the described order: the TAT, tapping achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1958), the first third of the Mandler-Sarason (1952) TAQ, measuring test anxiety, and Cohen's NFOS Scale (Canavan-Gumpert *et al.*, 1978).

Procedure

The TAT, administered under timed conditions, consisted of four word stems. Pictures were avoided in order to eliminate sex and ethnic bias, as well as problems associated with presenting dated stimuli. Students were given 20 seconds to read each TAT stem and four minutes to write each story; they worked at their own pace in completing the TAQ and NFOS scales.

Results: Preliminary Analyses

Although the data were examined separately by sample, similar patterns of results were obtained. Therefore, where possible, data were combined. Scores on the TAT, TAQ, and NFOS scales were divided into quartiles, with high quartiles representing high scores and low quartiles representing low scores.

Table 1 presents the combined intercorrelational data for subjects who participated in the preliminary testing, and subjects who participated in the empirical investigations.

Insert Table 1 about here

The correlation between the TAT and the TAQ was directionally inconsistent, sometimes weakly positive and sometimes weakly negative. It should be noted that a negative correlation between the TAT and NFOS (with the exception of Study 1), and a positive correlation between the TAQ and NFOS were obtained. The correlation reached significance only for preliminary testing subjects however, since the sample size was quite small for the remaining samples.

Table 2 presents the crosstabulation of NFOS with the resultant achievement motivation categories for the preliminary testing, and empirical investigations.

Insert Table 2 about here

The tabulation of the combined samples of male subjects shows that those with NFOS scores in the lowest quartile were more likely to fall into the nAch category (46%) than the

remaining categories. These subjects would, in previous studies. have been classified as non-success-fearers. For males, those with the highest quartile NFOS scores, (who would be called success-fearers in previous research, fell equally in the FOF category and the high TAT-high TAQ category. For females, a larger number of high NFOS subjects fell into the FOF category.

Study 1

Subjects

A total of 72 men enrolled in a variety of undergraduate courses at Boston College served as subjects. Only males were used because the research on achievement motivation has used male subjects.

Measures

Identical forms to those used in the preliminary testing session of the TAT, TAQ, and NFOS scales were administered. As in the preliminary testing, these measures were stapled together in the described order and presented to the subject as a packet. In addition, subjects performed three other tasks.

Reading Performance Task

In order to investigate the self-sabotage behavior, a Time 1-Time 2 reading task (Canavan-Gumpert et al, 1978) that has been used several times in NFOS research was administered. The four reading passages comprising "Time 1" were equal in length and level of difficulty to the four passages that comprised "Time 2". The first passage of each subtest was followed by eight multiple-choice questions; the other three passages of each subtest by four questions each.

Manipulation Check Measure

A questionnaire indicating subjects' reactions to the reading task was also given. This questionnaire, or "Reaction Sheet" measured affective reactions to the reading task, the experimenter, and the initial packet of measures, as well as serving as a check on the experimental manipulation and suspicion. The questionnaire contained 23 questions, some of which included separate parts, resulting in a total of 64 items.

Risk-Taking Task

In order to investigate the risk-taking paradigm associated with achievement motivation research, a risk-taking task (Raynor & Smith, 1966) was included. Subjects were given a booklet of five paper-and-pencil 'Connect-the-Numbers' puzzles intended to

be of the same difficulty. Each puzzle, placed on a single page, consisted of the numbers from 1 to 80 which were distributed in different patterns. Risk-taking levels were assessed through a goal discrepancy index (GD). This index is the level of aspiration for a puzzle (or the number a subject said he would try to reach in the allotted time) minus the attainment on the previous puzzle (or the number the subject actually reached on the previous puzzle). According to Raynor and Smith the center of the intermediate difficulty range is represented by a small positive GD, that is, the subject assumes he has a moderate chance of improving his performance on the next trial by a small amount. Therefore, the high need-achievers, preferring intermediate risks, should have GD scores with a relatively small variance centered around a relatively small positive discrepancy. However, failure-fearers, in avoiding intermediate risks, should have larger positive and/or negative GD scores with a larger variance.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was introduced as investigating "the relationship between the feelings and attitudes people have about various kinds of tasks and the strategies they develop in predicting how they will do on these tasks." Volunteer subjects were tested one at a time by one of three female experimenters. Subjects were paid five dollars for their participation; the testing session took approximately one and one-half hours to

complete.

After a brief description of the experimental procedure, subjects were presented with the packet of measures containing the TAT, TAQ and NFOS measures introduced as "an attitudinal inventory." They were administered in exactly the same manner as in preliminary testing.

In the reading task subjects were told to read a passage and answer the questions pertaining to that passage. However, prior to answering the questions, they were to predict how many items out of the total number of items they thought they would get right. The two sections of the reading test were presented as a "trial" and an "actual" test, respectively. After the trial test subjects were given false success feedback before they began the actual test. The entire reading task was done at the subject's own pace; however, all work was timed. At the completion of the "actual" test, the subject was given the "Reaction Sheet" and the experimenter left the room.

Following a short break the risk-taking task was presented and described as a separate study in an effort to reduce the potency of the effects of the order in which the subject took the reading and risk tasks. The experimenter presented the task as a measure of the ability of persons to organize and integrate information. The subject was given 20 seconds to "size up" each puzzle and 60 seconds to actually work on it. After sizing up a puzzle, but before working on it, the subject was to write at the

top of that puzzle the number he would try to reach in the allotted time. When all five puzzles were completed, the materials were collected and the subject was fully debriefed.

Results: Behavioral Measures.

Table 3 presents the reading task performance data.

Insert Table 3 about here

The trial test produced no significant differences in mean number of correct answers across NFOS classifications. However, significant differences emerged on the actual test performances, with high success fearers performing more poorly than the remaining subjects combined ($t(70)=-2.15$, $p<.05$) in general. The pattern can also be seen in the difference scores between the actual and trial tests, with success-fearers exhibiting the greatest decrement in performance overall ($t(70)=-2.08$, $p<.05$). In contrast, the nAch and FOF groups showed a performance difference at the start, with the nAch group exhibiting the greater mean number of correct answers on the trial test ($t(32)=2.20$, $p<.05$), a difference which, though only approaching significance, is maintained through the actual test. Reading task performance was also analyzed by TAQ quartiles. In contrast to the results for success-fearers, highly test-anxious subjects exhibited little or no tendency to self-sabotage from the trial

to the actual test.

Table 4 presents the performance data of the nAch, FOF and NFOS groups for the risk-taking task.

Insert Table 4 about here

A repeated measure analysis of variance conducted on the mean GD scores for the nAch and FOF groups showed no significant main effect for the resultant achievement motivation category and no significant interaction between the resultant achievement motivation category and measure. However, a significant main effect for the repeated measures variable was obtained ($F(3,96)=6.12$, $p<.001$). Contrary to the predictions, the GD measures of the nAch and FOF groups showed no significant differences in variance, with the exception of the third ($F(15,17)=2.30$, $p<.05$) and the total GD ($F(15,17)=2.49$, $p<.05$). On these GD measures the nAch group showed a significantly greater variance than the FOF group. The difference between the two groups was in the reverse direction from what was expected. A repeated measures analysis of variance conducted on the GD means for all NFOS classifications showed a significant main effect for repeated measures ($F(3,204)=8.42$, $p<.001$) and a significant interaction ($F(9,204)=2.02$, $p<.05$). No significant differences in GD variances were obtained between high and low success-fearers with the exception of GD3 ($F(16,15)=3.42$, $p<.05$),

which showed low success-fearers having a higher variance than high success-fearers.

Post-Experimental Questionnaire

Of the 61 "Reaction Sheet" items analyzed by way of analysis of variance four items differentiated resultant achievement classifications, but not NFOS classifications. For example, failure-fearers attributed their performance on the trial test to their effort more than to other factors, were more concerned about the number of questions they would get right while working on the actual reading test ($p<.05$), and were more concerned about the performance of others ($p<.01$) than were people in the other resultant achievement motivation classifications.

Of the 61 items analyzed, 20 differentiated NFOS classifications but not those of resultant achievement motivation. For example, when the study and its procedures were initially explained to the subjects, success-fearers felt more uncomfortable about predicting their score ($p<.05$) and apprehensive about receiving that score ($p<.01$) than non-success-fearers. Success-fearers also attributed their performance on the trial test to the easiness of the task more than to other factors ($p<.05$), felt more reluctant to go on to the actual passages, and less able to do as well or better the next time. In addition, before beginning the actual test and during it, success-fearers felt more anxious than

non-success-fearers.

Additional Empirical Work

Since the results for risk preference for the resultant achievement motivation category did not replicate the results of previous research, possible order effects were investigated. That is, the success feedback given in the reading task may have had an effect on the risk-taking behavior exhibited. Therefore, additional work was conducted. The reading task was omitted and the risk-taking task repeated (n=46) in groups so as to more closely parallel the method used by Raynor and Smith (1966). The previously obtained risk-taking patterns surfaced. No additional support for the difference between measures of resultant achievement motivation and NFOS was obtained.

Discussion

Despite failure to replicate the results of Smith and Raynor (1966), there is reasonably good evidence that NFOS, FOF, and nAch (as measured by the NFOS scale, the TAQ, and the TAT), are empirically as well as conceptually different. Although some of the findings obtained for NFOS were only marginally significant, they are taken seriously in that they are similar to patterns obtained in other studies. It is possible that these attenuated differences obtained in Study 1 were due to the fact that subjects filled out the TAT, NFOS, and TAQ measures early in the

testing session, thus taking some of the focus of attention away from the reading task.

In reviewing the findings of the present series of studies, several important issues emerge that provide support for viewing NFOS, FOF, and nAch as different achievement orientations. To begin with, preliminary crosstabulation of the measures across samples resulted in fairly consistent patterns with substantial nonoverlap: for males, success-fearers fell equally in the FOF, and the high TAT-high TAQ categories, while non-success-fearers fell predominantly in the nAch category. Females showed a similar pattern (though female success-fearers fell predominantly in the FOF category). While this preliminary work pointed to some delineation, the importance of the anxiety factor to both FOS and FOF is evident.

In addition, Study 1 provided clear evidence of behavioral and affective differences with regard to self-sabotage and other reactions to success. Following success-feedback, success-fearers showed a significant decrement in performance on the reading task as compared with the other NFOS classifications. Prior to the feedback there were no significant differences in reading task performance across these groups.

In contrast to success-fearers, the FOF group showed no greater tendency to engage in self-sabotage than the nAch group on the reading task following success-feedback. Unlike the NFOS classifications, the nAch and FOF groups exhibited a significant

difference in performance from the start, with the nAch group achieving a higher mean score. In addition, when the analysis was computed using only the TAQ scale, highly test-anxious subjects (as measured by the top TAQ quartile) also showed no tendency to engage in self-sabotage following success feedback. This difference in behavioral reactions to success on the part of success-fearers and test-anxious subjects provides support for the assertion that the success-fearer and the test-anxious individual do not respond similarly. While they share certain characteristics (as reflected in the moderately correlated scales), they differ on the behavioral level. Self-sabotage, as a unique characteristic of success-fearers, played no part in any of the other groups' behavioral reactions to success.

Furthermore, the self-report data obtained on the Study 1 post-experimental questionnaire also demonstrated significant differences between groups with regard to their affective reactions to success. While success-fearers reported concerns reflecting a preoccupation with evaluation and competition, a tendency to repudiate their competence, self-doubt and negative self-evaluation, the failure-fearing and nAch groups did not report these concerns to the same extent.

In contrast to these success-reaction measures, behavioral indices of risk-taking did not yield clear-cut results. In Study 1, mean goal discrepancies became smaller with repeated trials for both the resultant achievement motivation and NFOS

classifications, however no consistent mean differences in GD scores were obtained for either classification. In addition, the predicted differences in GD variance between the nAch and FOF groups did not emerge. Repetition of the risk-taking task without the reading task yielded the same patterns.

Finally, it must be recalled that the theoretical issues underlying the concepts of NFOS, nAch and FOF, and the content of the measures used, are really very different. Concern for the possible equivalency of FOF and NFOS measures stems from a resistance to the nonobvious nature of NFOS. That is, people resist the notion that many persons are genuinely conflicted about succeeding.

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Table 1

Intercorrelations of NFOS, TAT, TAQ and Risk Choice
Preliminary Sample, and Empirical Samples

	TAQ				NFOS				Diff. level task chosen	
	Preliminary				Preliminary				Preliminary	
	Male n=102	Female n=206	(Males) Empirical n=72	n=46	Male n=102	Female n=206	(Males) Empirical n=72	n=46	Male n=102	Female n=206
TAT	.022	-.163**	.133	-.130	-.241**	-.167**	.025	-.174	.112	.138
TAQ					.312***	.195**	.391	.438	-.138	-.168*
NFOS									-.312**	-.197*

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

Table 2

Crosstabulation of NFOS with Resultant Achievement Motivation by Sex

		Resultant Achievement Motivation			
			"Need-Achievers" (Ms > Mf)	"Failure-Fearers" (Mf > Ms)	
NFOS		hi TAT. hi TAQ	hi TAT. lo TAQ	lo TAT. hi TAQ	lo TAT. lo TAQ
Males:	hi	19 (37%)	7 (13%)	19 (37%)	7 (13%)
Preliminary Sample.	medhi	20 (37%)	7 (13%)	17 (31%)	10 (19%)
Empirical Samples	medlo	10 (16%)	18 (29%)	13 (21%)	21 (34%)
Combined	lo	6 (12%)	23 (46%)	8 (16%)	13 (26%)
Females:	hi	12 (23%)	9 (17%)	20 (39%)	11 (21%)
Preliminary Sample	medhi	12 (23%)	11 (21%)	15 (29%)	14 (27%)
	medlo	10 (20%)	13 (26%)	12 (24%)	15 (30%)
	lo	11 (22%)	22 (44%)	8 (16%)	9 (18%)

Table 3

Mean Performances on "Trial" and "Actual" Reading Task

NFOS

	hi n=16	medhi n=20	medlo n=19	lo n=17
Trial Test	15.31	15.05	15.63	16.18
Actual Test	13.63	14.90	15.84	15.65
Actual - Trial	- 1.69	- 0.15	0.21	- 0.53

Resultant Achievement Motivation

	"Need-Achievers" (Ms > Mf) n=16	"Failure-Fearers" (Mf > Ms) n=18
Trial Test	16.31	14.56
Actual Test	16.25	14.83
Actual - Trial	- 0.06	0.28

Table 4

Performance on Risk-Taking Task: Study 1

Resultant Achievement Motivation

Goal Discrepancy Measures	"Need-Achievers" (Ms > Mf) n=16 Mean	Variance	"Failure-Fearers" (Mf > Ms) n=18 Mean	Variance	F
GD1	6.19	(74.16)	1.94	(43.70)	1.70
GD2	3.94	(27.66)	1.28	(30.33)	1.10
GD3	2.69	(53.83)	-2.33	(23.41)	2.30*
GD4	-0.38	(48.78)	-1.06	(27.94)	1.75
Total GD	11.81	(472.70)	-0.17	(189.56)	2.49*

NFOS

Goal Discrepancy Measures	hi n=16 Mean	Variance	lo n=17 Mean	Variance	F
GD1	0.31	(65.30)	4.71	(51.72)	1.26
GD2	1.38	(43.72)	1.24	(54.44)	1.25
GD3	1.69	(25.56)	0.03	(87.47)	3.42*
GD4	-0.75	(41.13)	-0.18	(37.65)	1.09
Total GD	2.63	(364.12)	6.06	(530.68)	1.48

* $p<.05$.